

VARSITY FEES: NEW TURMOIL

Unrest looms despite plea by Blade

**VIRGILATTE GWANGWA
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STUDENTS at the University of Pretoria yesterday vowed to advance their demands vigorously, agitate society and disrupt academic operations if their mission of ensuring free education was not fulfilled.

They gave the university until Thursday to unblock all students' marks that had been blocked based on financial circumstances.

The students expressed their frustrations during a mass meeting convened following last week's Pretoria leg of the public hearings by the fees commission. Afterwards, the South African Union of Students indicated it was dissatisfied with the proceedings. The commission is investigating the feasibility of free higher education in the country.

Movements such as the EFF student command and the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania withdrew their participation at the commission, saying it was toothless after it conceded it had no powers to effect a no-fee increment for next year.

At the mass meeting, Tuks students said they rejected the fact that the commission was investigating the feasibility of free education instead of modalities on how to realise free and quality education.

SRC president Thabo Shigange said they expressed their disapproval of the delays in implementing the demands of the #FeesMustFall protests of last year. He said they were also dissatisfied with the amendment of the terms of reference of the commission to allow for a report back on June 30 next year.

"We have entered a stage in which education is not just a luxury permitting the rich an advantage over the poor, but rather the age in which it is a necessity of which without such, one is defenceless in this highly industrialised society.

"It is unfortunate that as students we are in no different a position than we were last year during the #FeesMust-Fall protest," said Shigange.

He said it was not far-fetched for students to demand no increment and intensify the call for free quality education.

"Even the National Treasury did not budget for a 0% increment with the same understanding that by 2016 the commission would have reported accordingly on this fundamental human right, not privilege.

"As a result, students cannot be entertaining fee increments when there have been no substantial measures put in place to address the concerns of last year," he said.

The students were also angry that some of them could not access their marks as they were blocked from the system.

Shigange said they made an agreement with management that no students' marks would be blocked due to financial circumstances.

The demands also included an end to student victimisation with particular emphasis on the so-called Tuks 24, who were arrested during a protest regarding the new language policy in February, as well as a moratorium on fee increments.

Tuks spokeswoman Anna-Retha

Bouwer said the university supported the right to a peaceful protest, but violent and unlawful action would not be tolerated.

"The safety of students, staff and property takes priority," she said.

Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande made an impassioned plea to students not to shut down universities over fee increases.

He pleaded for more consultation time, saying he was eager that the matter be settled as soon as possible.

He said his department was in consultations after the Council of Higher Education recommended uniform fee increases for 2017, saying institutions would not be able to afford another year without increasing fees.

"There's no need to shut down any

university, honestly. We are engaging with everyone and the sooner we are able to finalise this matter, the better. That is why we have set a target for ourselves... by the end of August," Nzimande told journalists in Joburg.

Nzimande urged all students' formations to make submissions to the commission rather than resort to protests. "They must seek to influence it. We think that it is not correct to make a demand and when a platform is created, you pull out."

He said if the fees were not increased for 2017, that should not be for all students but for the poor only. He said government was committed to providing free education to the poor. "We cannot burden poor parents with paying university fees," he said.